

Old Rules Go Up In Smoke.
Changes at Sweet Briar, 1930-1939.

I pledge... Jade Bomar

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There is a commonly used adage that says you must fight for what you believe in. That is one lesson that women in the South have learned from those in the North. During the 1920's young women at Northern colleges were far more liberal, both socially and sexually, than their Southern counterparts. They gained many freedoms by rebelling and simply ignoring the regulations that had been set because they felt they deserved to be treated more like adults and less like children. The women began smoking, drinking, going on dates without chaperones, and breaking curfew all to make the point that they were grown women who would do as they pleased. Amy McCandless, a writer, found that students in the South however tended to abide by the rules that were set for them and led more religious lives throughout the same decade. They did not want to cause trouble and felt that it was their obligation to do as they were instructed to and avoid controversy. The young women were placed upon a pedestal, which required them to maintain their ladylike image and uphold the reputations of their schools. It wasn't until the 1930's that many of the women in the South stood up for themselves and received the same privileges that Northerners had some ten years before them.¹

¹ Amy T. McCandless, "Preserving the Pedestal: Restrictions on Social Life at Southern

At Sweet Briar College, a southern school for women in rural Virginia, the students were expected to be very feminine and proper, both on campus and in the surrounding towns of Amherst and Lynchburg. During the 1920's they could not smoke, drink, go on dates without a chaperone, or ride in cars with young men.² They did not rebel against these rules however, as women in the North did, but through articles in works such as The Sweet Briar News they made it clear as to what they wanted. The college began to listen to them and eventually permitted the young women to enjoy many new privileges. Although numerous exultations had been set in the earlier years of the college, in the 1930's students began enjoying more freedoms which multiplied throughout the decade. They were never as radical as women in the North tended to be, but the extra privileges the women were given recognized the fact that they were all young adults who deserved to be treated as such. The simple act of allowing the students to begin participating in activities such as smoking and dancing with men showed that the Southern pedestal was beginning to fall and progressive ways were beginning to take over.

Colleges for Women, 1920-1940." The Past in the Present: Women's Higher Education in the Twentieth-Century American South. p. 45-63.

² "Regulations," Students' Handbook for Sweet Briar College. 1920-1929. ed. Young Women's Christian Association.

The following analysis on women at Sweet Briar College covers the years of 1930 through 1939. This time period spans from the beginning of the depression up until World War II and will show the many changes that occurred for these students over the decade.

At Sweet Briar College, upholding a prestigious and lady like image had always been an important part of life for the students who attended the institution. Therefore, in order to maintain that image, the young women were prohibited from smoking on the campus or in any other public place in Amherst or Lynchburg up until 1930. Knowing that women at Northern colleges were already smoking, the Sweet Briar women wanted the privilege as well. Some students often ignored the rules against smoking by doing it in their dorm rooms or off campus where they would not be caught. It was not until the 1930-1931 school year that they were finally given the freedom to smoke by the school. The students were allowed to enjoy a cigarette on campus at various times and places designated in the handbook. Some of these included outdoors until dark, the Dell at West of the campus, Gray, Randolph, and Grammar residence halls, as well as indoors for a short time after meals.³ Although this

³ "Regulations," Students' Handbook for Sweet Briar College. 1930-1931. ed. Young Women's Christian Association. Pg. 50.

privilege still had its restrictions, it was a major step for the young women at Sweet Briar College and proved to be the first of many changing rules throughout the 1930's.

During the same school year of 1930-1931 the students were also allowed to enjoy a new and much desired freedom. The seniors, juniors, and sophomores were allowed to ride in cars with men un-chaperoned for the first time since the school was founded.⁴ The women had hoped for this privilege for a number of years but it was never approved because the college viewed it as un-ladylike. By allowing the upperclassmen to actually leave the campus with their dates and no chaperone was an enormous amount of freedom for them. It was a way for the women to enjoy a bit of privacy, but also gave them the surreal feeling of adulthood which they had always been sheltered from. For the faculty to allow the students this significant privilege proved that they understood that women were becoming more progressive during that time period and deserved to be responsible for their own actions.

In 1932 the young women were also given the privilege of being able to ride into the city of Lynchburg with a group of their friends. They could do so in order to see motion pictures, concerts, or hear lectures

⁴ "Regulations," Student's Handbook for Sweet Briar College. 1930-1931. ed. Young Women's Christian Association. Pg. 54

which were being held in the city, and for the first time they did not have to take a chaperone with them.⁵ Up until this point the women had been on a short leash, so to speak, and could not go to Lynchburg without first securing permission and a school approved chaperone. This was a tedious rule to have to follow each time the women wanted to see a movie, and it gave them a sense of relief once it was done away with. The new rule meant that the women could enjoy spur of the moment trips and exciting evenings without feeling as if they were being baby-sat by a chaperone. This showed that the school recognized them as young women, not young girls, and trusted them to act decently in public without the supervision of an adult.

One of the biggest changes, and the turning point of the decade, was the ending of compulsory chapel at Sweet Briar College. The 1932-1933 school year was the first in which the school stated that they were non-sectarian, but they still emphasized the fundamental principles of Christianity.⁶ Prior to that year every student at the school was required to attend chapel on Sunday, convocation on Thursday, and at least one

⁵ "Regulations," Students' Handbook for Sweet Briar College. 1931-1932. ed. Young Women's Christian Association. Pg. 58.

⁶ "Religion," Students' Handbook for Sweet Briar College. 1932-1933. ed. Young Women's Christian Association. Pg. 73.

other service per week.⁷ Sweet Briar had been founded as a religious, Christian college, so abolishing the compulsory chapel was a drastic change for many students and faculty who had known nothing else. Although a large number of students did continue attending the Sunday services, it was a freedom for those students who did not wish to do so or happened to follow a different religion than was being preached at the college. This showed a major change for Sweet Briar, because like many other Southern schools, religion had always played a large role in the institution. The students had been required to obtain six curriculum hours of religion and were given no choice as to whether they wanted to attend the services or not. By abolishing the rule which required students to attend chapel services, Sweet Briar recognized that the women were adults who had the right to choose whether or not they wished to go to chapel. This allowed women to feel as if they had the right to their own opinion and were not merely confined to the regulations set by the school's faculty.

Even as rules were being abolished and changes occurred, the young ladies still remained respectable. The women of Sweet Briar College have always lived by the Honor Pledge and it was once required

⁷ "Religion" Students' Handbook for Sweet Briar College. 1931-1932. ed. Young Women's Christian Association. Pg. 72.

that they write out the entire pledge on the top of each assignment that they turned in. It was not until November of 1935 that this rule was done away with after a majority of the student body expressed a desire to abolish the use of writing out the pledge on all the work they turned in.⁸ The faculty accepted their proposal and agreed to accept the student's signature as a pledge of honest work from that point forward. The students of Sweet Briar viewed themselves as respectable women who abided by the rules, and having to write that they did not cheat each time they turned in work seemed to insult them because they felt that it was implied. By abolishing this rule the college was showing the students that they were willing to put their trust in them and take their word that they would remain honorable even when they did not write it out.

Perhaps by 1935 Sweet Briar acknowledged the fact that they were becoming more liberal and therefore appealing to more women. As part of their campaign to attract students for the next year, they printed an article describing the various activities that the young ladies could participate in each weekend where young men would also be present.⁹ Although it was all to be under supervision, the school explained that the

⁸ "Pledge Abolished," The Sweet Briar News, 28 November 1935. Pg. 1

⁹ "Dances and Dates Enliven College Year," The Sweet Briar News, 6 June 1935. Pg. 3.

students would have informal dances every Saturday night where they could entertain their dates. Another aspect that they hoped to attract young women with was the fact that movies were played in the chapel on weekends where the students and the men there to visit them could go to and spend time together. This goes to show that while some colleges in the South were still forbidding men and women to dance together, Sweet Briar was one of the only schools using that as one of their selling points.¹⁰ They realized that young women naturally enjoy the company of young men and were making provisions to help them do so in a safe and entertaining environment.

During the 1936 school year there were two events that showed the change of Sweet Briar College academically during the 1930's. In May of that year the Dean announced that seven new subjects were going to be offered as majors for the following year. These included Bio-Sociology, Classical Civilization, Physical Mathematics, International Affairs, Political Economy, Religion and Social Problems, and Religion and Social Theory in the Renaissance.¹¹ By adding these advanced courses to the curriculum, Sweet Briar was recognizing the fact that it was not just a finishing school

¹⁰ Amy T. McCandless, "Preserving the Pedestal: Restrictions on Social Life at Southern Colleges for Women, 1920-1940." The Past in the Present: Women's Higher Education in the Twentieth-Century American South. Pg. 49-50.

¹¹ "Dean Announces 7 New Subjects offered for Major," The Sweet Briar News. 6 May 1936. Pg. 1.

where girls came before they got married. The courses that were added were all important and benefiting subjects that had not previously been offered because it no one thought women needed such classes. By offering them these level courses it showed that the women were obviously smart and that the college recognized their potential to go onto careers other than just teaching or mother hood. It established itself as an institution where young women could come for a progressive education in subjects that would prepare them for their futures.

The other event of that year was the establishment of a group called the Tripos. This club was formed for the young women who were taking advanced courses in Chemistry, Physics, or Mathematics.¹² By creating a club specifically for these advanced academic subjects, the school showed that it supported and encouraged the women to be progressive both socially and mentally.

As the school became more forward thinking, so did the students. In 1937 there was a complaint published in the school paper, which stated that a large number of the underclassmen were breaking the regulations outlined in the student handbook, especially the one that only allowed them to ride in cars with boys until 8:30 p.m. In their defense the

¹² "Girls in Advanced Science Introduce New Organization," The Sweet Briar News. 27 February 1936. Pg. 1.

women always claimed ignorance, but in actuality it was their way of rebelling against a rule which they did not approve of.¹³ The women felt that they should be able to stay out past that time and therefore they defied the rule by returning to the campus later than they were supposed to. Just as the women in the North had rebelled some ten years before, the Sweet Briar women followed their lead and soon reaped the benefits. In 1938 the faculty responded to the students by giving all of the classes the privilege of riding to and from Amherst and Lynchburg with their dates until 10:30.¹⁴ This two hour extension pleased the young women and showed cooperation on the school's part by compromising with the students.

In 1938 The Sweet Briar News published a letter written by a student expressing a desire that she shared with many of her fellow classmates. In her letter she said that they wanted a place within walking distance of the school where they could drink beer so that they would no longer have to travel to Lynchburg.¹⁵ During 1938 drinking was still prohibited by the college, but the fact that they published the letter and recognized the fact that students did drink alcohol without punishing them shows that

¹³ "Lets Learn Our Rules," The Sweet Briar News. 1 December 1937. Pg. 2.

¹⁴ "Letter to the Editor," The Sweet Briar News. 20 April 1938. Pg. 2.

¹⁵ "Letter to the Editor," The Sweet Briar News. 25 October 1938. Pg. 2.

the school acknowledged the women's choice to be liberal and progressive. Although the rule against drinking was not changed that year, the girls were eventually given the privilege of drinking on campus and in neighboring towns.

The changes made during the 1930's were the beginning of a new Sweet Briar College, one more like what is known today. The school is currently recognized as a liberal arts college, which is a vast difference from the 1920's when it was seen as extremely conservative and known for maintaining the lady-like image of the South. Just as Amy McCandless observed, Sweet Briar was originally like the other Southern colleges who set strict regulations and placed the students upon a pedestal, but the college soon broke away from that mold. Starting in 1930 the school began to worry less about its image and more about keeping the students happy. Although they did not realize it at the time, the students and faculty members who attributed to the changes during the 1930's paved the way for all the students to come. Thanks to those before them they were able to enjoy the same privileges and freedoms as the women at other schools, such as those in the North. The 1930's were a very progressive decade for women at Sweet Briar and it just went to show that even though many rules were abolished and extra freedoms were given, the women did not abuse them. They upheld the reputation of the

given, the women did not abuse them. They upheld the reputation of the college throughout the changing times and were therefore awarded with more privileges as the years went on. By allowing the women the freedoms that are often taken for granted today, the faculty helped to create a well-rounded student body that could prosper academically and socially. Although McCandless's theory of Southern women being placed upon a pedestal may have applied for other colleges, Sweet Briar made an effort to treat their students as progressive young women and that became obvious throughout the years of the school. Even though the women of the North may have gained their freedom first, the women at Sweet Briar were able to receive theirs while keeping their dignity. By viewing the events of the 1930's and the way that the students handled them, it is safe to conclude that the extra privileges given during the decade turned out to affect the school and its students positively.

Bibliography

I. Primary Sources

Students' Handbook for Sweet Briar College. 1913-Present. ed. Young Women's Christian Association. Sweet Briar, Virginia: Sweet Briar Archives in Rare Book Room, archive #2. Handbooks located on left side of room, 3rd shelf back, 3rd row from bottom. These handbooks were very useful for determining various rules and regulations that were added or abolished during certain years of the school. They are a quick way to find changes from one year to the next, but do not explain any of them and were only meant for students to know the rules and organizations of the school.

The Sweet Briar News. 1927-Present. Sweet Briar, Virginia: Sweet Briar Archives in Rare Book Room, archive #2. Located on left side of room, 4th shelf back, 2nd and 3rd row from bottom. These papers were very helpful in providing the student's opinions on the changing rules during the 1930's. It also gave explanations for some of the regulations that were abolished and although it may have been biased as far as the opinions go, it seemed to portray the majorities ideas.

II. Secondary Sources

McCandless, Amy T. "Preserving the Pedestal: Restrictions on Social Life at Southern Colleges for Women, 1920-1940." The Past in the Present: Women's Higher Education in the Twentieth-Century American South. Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press, 1999. pp. 45-63. This article was very helpful for gathering information on Northern and Southern colleges other than Sweet Briar during the 1920's and 1940's. Although it is biased on McCandless's opinions on certain issues, it states many useful facts about women's lives during that time period and allowed me to compare the pace at which certain colleges became progressive.